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ABSTRACT

Many poor families in rural West Virginia live in unsafe, unsanitary structures that do not protect them from the elements, but these families are not considered officially homeless. Lincoln and Clay Counties are very rural, traditionally poor areas, with 45% of their populations receiving welfare and much larger proportions receiving food stamps. Interviews with 82 poor families and local officials and community workers in the two counties revealed that: (1) much of the available housing is substandard; (2) poor families cannot afford safe and decent housing; (3) entire families live nomadic existences, moving from one substandard house to another; (4) bad water places families at risk in other areas of their lives; (5) families living in substandard conditions have high rates of illness; (6) children living in substandard conditions have a high rate of school failure, or are "gray area" students (in need of help but not eligible for special education) and allowed to move through the school system without learning; (7) the state's Landlord-Tenant Act does not protect poor families who take what shelter is available; (8) the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsidizes substandard housing with taxpayer money; (9) the State Department of Human Services does not recognize substandard housing in making homelessness funds available; and (10) existing programs that provide weatherizaton supplies or pay utilities do not address these problems adequately. The report makes recommendations concerning state housing and water standards, the issues of land ownership and unemployment, investigations of state programs and use of HUD funds, local planning, and possible resources. (SV)

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The Rural Homelessness Project

"It ain't much, but it's all I got"

A study of living conditions in two rural West Virginia counties.

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'IT AIN'T MUCH, BUT
IT'S ALL I GOT'

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and
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"The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity." _ George Bernard Shaw

YEAR OF SHELTER FOR THE HOMELESS

The United Nations General Assembly has designated 1987 as the International year of shelter for the homeless. In defining the homeless, the General Assembly said:

> *"The International Year will highlight the plight of the millions of people with no home -- the pavement dwellers, those who must sleep in doorways, subways and recesses of public buildings and those rendered homeless by natural and man-made disasters.*
>
> *But the Year will also highlight the plight of hundreds of millions who lack a real home -- one which provides protection from the elements; has access to safe water and sanitation; provides for secure tenure and personal safety; is within easy reach of centers for employment, education and health care; and is at a cost which people and society can afford."*

INTRODUCTION

Step into the house of a poor Appalachian family on a blustery March morning when the snow is flying and the trees are bending in the wind.

The house is dark, it is damp and it is cold. A fire -- wood, coal or gas -- is blazing in one corner of the room, but three feet away it can't be felt. Children are playing barefoot, their noses running, their little hands and feet growing numb from the cold.

The windows are loose and rattle with each gust of wind. Sometimes they are covered with plastic, but just as often they are not. Even if the windows are protected, the wind whips through holes in the cardboard walls, freezing water that sits in dishes in the kitchen.

Many of the houses do not have running water. Even if there is water, most of the time it is not drinkable. Electric wires are hooked into open fuse boxes and hang like clotheslines across the room. If it is raining, buckets are positioned to catch water dripping through leaking roofs and sagging ceilings.

The almost nauseating odor of decaying wood and dampness is overpowering. "I've scrubbed and scrubbed and I can't get rid of that smell," one young mother-to-be complained.

This is the environment hundreds of Appalachian children leave when they go to school in the morning with empty stomachs and tattered clothing. This is where hundreds of women spend their days staring at the ever-running television set.

Is it any wonder that in such conditions their hopes fade and their dreams turn into a constant nightmare of survival? Is it any wonder that their children fail in school and doom themselves to a future of the same?

The sad thing is that in 1987 this nation has little else to offer them.

THE PLIGHT OF THE RURAL POOR

In mid-1986 Covenant House and the Charleston Coalition for the Homeless, two groups that have worked with the homeless in West Virginia's capital city, decided that more needed to be learned about the condition of homelessness in rural areas. How do the poorest of poor exist in the poorest of West Virginia's counties?

With a $7,000 grant from the James C. Penney Foundation and a $5,000 grant from the New York Community Trust, they sent an investigator into two rural counties. The intent was not to gather statistical data, but to talk with families, with officials and with church and community workers who might be able to offer some insight into living conditions.

The investigator located and conducted interviews with more than 100 individuals in Lincoln and Clay counties, most of them members of families living on the edge of the most excruciating poverty.

These interviews provided a detailed picture of the lives of the families--their struggles to survive, their efforts to keep decaying roofs over their heads, their battles with catastrophic illness, their hopes for their children and their frustrations with the school system.

We also learned how the families are perceived by officials. In both Lincoln and Clay counties, we spoke with public officials and others who offer services to the poor. For the purposes of this report, those paid with taxpayer money are referred to as "officials." Those paid from private sources are referred to as "community workers." Both families and officials were promised anonymity.

The most sympathetic local health and welfare officials go out of their way to do more than their jobs dictate, helping families find better housing, begging furniture and other necessities for them. At the other end of the spectrum, we found officials who suggested that welfare fraud is rampant and that the poor should be better able to manage their meager checks. In between the two extremes were the majority, nice people but detached, seemingly unable to comprehend the reality of living in an ice cold house with a bunch of children underfoot, never able to afford a night out or a moment apart from the children, constantly worried about feeding and clothing them and keeping them well, living with the knowledge that there are no jobs to be found and there will never be enough money to provide even the necessities.

"Things are better than they used to be," we were told time and again, especially in Lincoln County. And yet our trips to the tops of mountains and

the heads of hollows -- driving through creekbeds miles past where the hard road ends -- told us a different story: a tale of deprivation and fear and powerlessness.

It was a picture drawn by men and women and children who opened their homes and their hearts to us:

* The young woman nearing the end of a difficult pregnancy who pleaded for any place to bring her newborn instead of the shed-like building in which she and her husband lived, a thin-walled structure where the floors had buckled, the doors wouldn't shut and the sickening smell of rot permeated the air. "I won't bring my baby here," she said.
* The mother of five living in a house with no heat source except for the tiny electric heater she had bought on credit. "I don't know what we'll do when it really gets cold," she said as she and the children huddled around the small heater on a chilly October morning.
* The family of six living in a trailer jammed between another trailer and a hillside in a crowded trailer park. "I hate it here," the mother said. "My kids are sick constantly. It's so damp up here."
* The young woman living with her husband and two children at the head of a hollow, without transportation and miles from the nearest store, who told us she would love to move back to Cleveland. "At least there I could get out and walk to the store," she said. "I'd love to hear the noise again."
* The 100-year-old man who lives alone in a two-room house without

running water, but who said he would be content if he could just have a front porch. His porch fell off under the weight of the winter's last snow.

* The family of seven that has had four houses destroyed by fire. "This was the only house we could afford," the mother said of the dilapidated structure with the suspicious wiring. "It's hard to find a place to live."

* The 17-year-old in the first stages of pregnancy who lived with her young husband in the one room they had salvaged of a house that had been left to deteriorate. "I didn't finish school," she said. Asked what she does after she's cleaned the spotless room, she replied. "I watch the soaps."

* The woman with absolutely no income who had been unable to pay rent for a year. Told by her landlord to get out, the woman said, "But we have nowhere to go. Nowhere."

* And finally, the woman who kept watch while her husband maintained that their ancient house was all right. As she peeped from the shadows of the dank dwelling, acknowledging an illness she knew would kill her, she told us how bad the house really was, how she could no longer make it to the outhouse. "I can't do anything about the house," she said, "but I'd like to get some pink roses to plant between the red ones. I won't get to see them bloom, but they'll be there." The family was evicted shortly thereafter.

These families and others like them helped us understand the basic truth that a roof over the head does not mean the family is not homeless.

THE MYTH OF PROTECTION

The State of West Virginia has on its books a "Landlord-Tenant Act" to protect those who rent housing. The law is designed to ensure that rental property is fit and "habitable" when families move in and requires that landlords maintain it in that condition.

The law states that the landlord must provide:

--Sinks, bathtubs, toilets and plumbing that works

--Hot water

--Heat available from October through April

--Safe and reliable electrical connections

--A ventilation system.

All of these conditions are basic and essential to the well-being of the family that lives in the house. Yet many, many houses in rural West Virginia lack some or all of these necessities.

For instance, the Rural Homelessness Study found twelve families living in rental property who do not have running water. Almost none could be said to have "safe and reliable" electrical connections and two did not have any source of heat. A number of families provide their own heating systems, moving coal and wood stoves each time they change residence.

"We have a lot of slum housing not fit for anyone to live in," a Clay County official said. "(Congressman) Bob Wise did a survey and it said we have a lack of quality rental housing."

The problem with enforcement of the Landlord-Tenant act is that tenants must initiate action against landlords. "But you know what happens if they do," the official said. "They (the landlords) just tell them to move out."

Although the state had a fund set aside to provide aid for the homeless, the state welfare system does not recognize any degree of substandard conditions as so bad as to constitute homelessness. Substandard housing conditions can be used as a reason to remove children from the home, we were told, but not to provide aid from the funds set aside for the homeless.

These funds must be used for those who have absolutely no relatives with whom they can live and absolutely no roof over their heads. What this translates to is assistance for a small number of transients, two or three per year in Lincoln and Clay counties, who are put up in small hotels or sent to shelters in Charleston or Huntington.

"We don't address substandard," a state official said. "There's a bias not to talk about those folks as homeless. Once they're defined as homeless, we're responsible."

Nor is overcrowding recognized as a condition of homelessness -- even the instance we uncovered of 15 persons living in a five-room house.

"If they're living with a relative and they decide it's too crowded, under our rule and regulations, we would consider that they have a home," one

official said. "As long as they have a home to go back to, they're not homeless."

A community worker said she sometimes recommended that families live in their cars for several days before seeking assistance. "Sometimes then they will help them," she said.

To those who complain that they can't locate suitable housing, an official responded, "These people find lots of homes to move to -- they move monthly."

Unfortunately for those who move often, moving does not necessarily mean better housing. For those who have always lived in substandard conditions, their housing may seem all right to them.

As one woman told us: "This is not what you'd call a real bad place. We don't have heat. We've bought pipes for the plumbing but we don't have it laid down. But this isn't a bad place."

For those who own their homes or who live rent-free in family-owned homes, there is no pretense of protection. They know they're lucky to have a place at all.

THE REALITY

"Better than 25 percent of the housing in this county should be destroyed for health reasons," a Clay County official said. "You can look at the houses and they look fine from the outside, but you could go inside and set off a bug bomb and in an hour the bugs are back, the house is full of rats, there's no

insulation, the walls are thin. It's not conducive for an elderly person or a child to live in.

"There's so much here that's deplorable. Officials will not say how bad it is. I don't know whether they're ashamed or what. I went into one place that had no insulation. Eight kids were standing around a red hot stove -- the slightest brush they could be on fire. But it's so cold you can hardly feel the heat from the stove. There's no water or restrooms and huge cracks in the walls."

The bone-chilling cold that comes with living in an uninsulated, thin-walled house was mentioned by family after family.

"I ain't never lived in no house like this," said a woman whose newborn baby lay on the bed in the one room of the house the family could use. The snow blew outside and the wind whipped through gaping holes in the walls. "It's too cold to live."

"There just isn't housing to be found," said a Lincoln County community worker. "Even the stuff we're helping people find is the pits. If we have somebody we're trying to help find something, first thing we'll do is get the county paper and check. They'll have maybe three or four listed -- the rent is $230. The first thing they ask is, 'Are they on welfare?'"

A Clay County mother of six, describing her residence, said, "We've been here six years and the walls are literally falling in. The housing situation is really bad here."

The Rural Homelessness Project found that the more closely officials and community workers worked with poor families -- the more home visits, the more contact -- the higher the estimates of substandard conditions.

A Clay official offered the opinion that those who work with the poor may see too much. "Sometimes we get to the point where we're numb," she said. "Housing starts looking not so bad compared to other housing. At least 50 percent, if not more, is substandard."

A Lincoln County community worker agreed. "I would guess those in substandard housing would be those on welfare," she said. "More than 50 percent of this county is on welfare."

An employee of a program that works with women and children reported, "Most of our families live in inadequate housing -- no water, no heat, porches falling off. What we run into is inadequate housing and no place to move to. I'd say 20 percent of our families move during the year."

Welfare officials admitted that their caseloads are higher than ever before.

"Our food stamp caseload is higher than it's ever been," a Lincoln County official said. A Clay County official said, "Our work load has increased in the past three years, especially for economic services, checks, food stamps. At times we had less than 50 AFDCU cases. Recently it's been above 200."

The average monthly food stamp caseload in Lincoln County in 1986-87 was 6,732 -- or 32.6 percent of the county, according to state figures. But these figures included only the head of household in whose name the food stamps were

issued. If, as suggested by a Department of Human Services official, this number is multiplied by two or three (to include family members), the percentages increase dramatically. Multiplied by two, the number of persons on food stamps would be 13,464 or 63 percent of the county's population of 21,100. If the average family size is 2.2, as it was for the Rural Homelessness study, the number of Lincoln Countians on food stamps is 14,810 -- or 70 percent of the county.

In Clay County, the figures are even more astonishing. State figures show the food stamp caseload at 3,830, or 33.6 percent of the county population of 11,400. Assuming an average of two persons per family, that number soars to 7,660, or 67 percent of the county. If the average family size is three persons, as it was for this study, the number climbs to 11,490 -- or more than the total population of Clay County. Officials have estimated that as many as 90 percent of Clay County residents receive food stamps.

Unemployment figures were virtually worthless since almost every head of household we met had been unemployed for at least three years and had long since exhausted his or her unemployment benefits. Such individuals are no longer included in unemployment figures.

A better indicator is the caseload of the AFDC-AFDCU programs (Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Unemployed).

The combined number of AFDC and AFDCU cases in Lincoln County was 3,155 in 1986-87. Multiplying this by an average family size of three (since families

must have children to qualify), the figure becomes 9,465 or 45 percent of the county population.

The numbers are about the same in Clay County, where the combined number of AFDC-AFDCU cases was 1,720. Again multiplying by three, the figure becomes 5,160, or 45 percent of the total county population.

The problem that families face, succinctly put by a Lincoln County official, is they "don't draw a big enough check" to pay the rent and utilities. "A family of four gets $312. Out of that $312, $200 goes to rent a place. Then you've got to pay water, electric, gas. You can't cover all of that."

"We don't never have nothing left from our check," said a Clay County woman. "Right now the car insurance is due and the hospital is dunning us." (The Department of Human Services allows a family one vehicle worth $1500 and an additional $1,000 in assets. If the family has a vehicle worth more than this or additional assets, it does not qualify for assistance.)

"They're told constantly to get jobs, but it takes so much energy to just survive," a Lincoln County worker said. "The check is a joke. Landlords know how much it is and charge rent accordingly. Places that are not habitable rent for $250."

Many families live in unsafe structures, but don't move either because they've always lived that way or because it's better than the last place they had, one official said.

Another described the procedure more personally. "Bonnie's trying to get Cathy's house that Cathy moved out of because it was inadequate. But Bonnie's been living in a one-room trailer."

Or they stay because it is theirs. "I built this house," a Lincoln County man said. "It ain't much, but it's all I got. It's a roof over my head, but it leaks. It's about like being outside."

A community worker in Clay County described a Catch 22 situation for families trapped in bad housing.

"A big part of the problem is many people don't own their home or land," he said. "They rent a place. In a way it's a slum landlord, but the rent doesn't give the landlord enough to put into repairs. If he doesn't raise the rent, he can't afford to make repairs."

So many families move -- from one bad house to another, exchanging one set of problems for another.

"What we run into is inadequate housing and no place to move to," a Clay official said. "I'd say 20 percent of our families move during the year, some as many as five times. It's like a migrant work force."

"I've been married two years and I've moved six times," a Clay County woman said. "We've lived here a little over a year. Until we moved here, it seems like we moved every other month. I've been in a lot of homes that need help. This one is probably one that should be knocked over, but there's really not any nice places in Clay you can afford to rent."

"They're con artists," said a Clay County official. "They come to you, 'My social security check is held up, I have back pay coming and you'll be the first to be paid.' Then they stay until you evict them and they move far enough away that the new landlord doesn't check back and they move out of the district of the power company."

But these "con artists" live with the stress that comes from not having enough money to live decently. It's not that they don't want to pay the rent. It's just that sometimes, the hospital payment is due or the children need new shoes or the utility bill is past-due.

They also don't have many options. If they complain about wiring or plumbing or heat, they know the answer will likely be, "If you don't like the setup, move."

Or, as a Clay County official said, "If we complain about coal camp houses, the company will just tell people to move out and they'll tear the houses down. The sad part is people accept these things, don't they? People have an acceptance of this like they think that's all they deserve."

But they can't afford the alternatives. As a Lincoln County woman described her situation, "I've got no running water, no bathroom. I live in an old log house that doesn't have no insulation. I heat with coal, but we freeze in the winter. I just freeze and use an electric blanket. You get used to the cold. Your system gets immune to it. People will live in just about anything because they have to."

THE LUXURY OF WATER

Water -- so vital for health and sanitation. Most families in the United States take for granted that when they turn on the faucet, an unending supply of fresh, pure water will be available for drinking and cooking, to clean their homes and bodies, to wash their clothes.

But countless Appalachian families don't even have faucets. Many of those who do have running water risk their health if they drink the iron- and sulfur-laden, oil-slickened stuff that comes out of their taps.

"I consider running water a necessity, but a lot of our people consider it a luxury," a Clay County official told us. Our findings supported her statement.

Thirty-seven of 82 families surveyed in the two counties did not have hot and cold running water, almost half of those in Clay County and approximately a third of those in Lincoln County.

"We don't have no running water," a mother of five told us. "We carry it from the spring. I've never had running water."

"Quite a few people get water from springs, but it really isn't a spring," a Clay County official said. "It's a dammed-up creek piped to the house. A majority have well water. It's almost impossible to protect them from surface water."

Complaints about water quality were more common in Lincoln County, where even the officials we interviewed remarked about the foul-tasting "red" water that discolors clothing and fixtures.

"My water is awful," one woman told us. "I had it tested by the Health Department and they told me the salt content was so high it was dangerous -- in addition to having sulfur that makes it smell and iron that destroys all of your fixtures."

"No one around here has good water," a Lincoln County official said. "We don't. We bought a water softener. People who live in the hollow up from me have moved trailers in. They don't have bathrooms. Families live with families, but most don't have bathrooms. It costs so much to have a well drilled, and even if you drill it, you can't afford to get a softener."

A Clay County official offered the opinion that water and sewage is a major problem county-wide. "I'd say there's only about 1,000 houses that have city water and 400 have city sewer."

Unfortunately, as a health official explained, all that can be done to rectify the problems of bad water and unsafe sewage disposal systems is that landlords be notified of unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

"And you know they don't care," he said. "I notify the owner if people want me to, but usually they don't want me to unless they're getting ready to move."

An outhouse, in many cases, is a better solution to the problem than faulty indoor plumbing and inadequate or non-existent sewage systems, according to health officials in both counties. "They're luckier sometimes if they have an outhouse because indoor commodes get stopped up and they keep using them and then you've got a real mess," one official said.

Another shook his head. "People don't apply for septic system permits and there's not much we can do. What are you going to do to some poor old lady on social security that doesn't have the money to get her septic system fixed?"

WHEN THE PHYSICAL BODY ISN'T ABLE

"The vital connection between poverty and sickness is bad water," a Lincoln County health official told us. "So much of the disease I see comes from the wells," she said. "If we could help people dig decent wells, we'd help a lot.

"It starts with the baby. You're basically mixing a formula with sewer water. Kids get diarrhea and bacterial infections that sometimes lead to meningitis.

"The Health Departments are run ragged. They don't have time to pay attention to wells. The medical people in Huntington assume everyone lives in downtown Huntington. So the babies get cavities, lose their teeth and suffer from poor nutrition.

"Then there's pneumonia in children. The parents all smoke. The mother smokes while she's pregnant. In one week, I visited six kids in the hospital with pneumonia.

"The house is drafty, they have wood stoves. The three-year-old sniffles, everybody has allergies. The kids either survive or get 3,000 pneumonias and die.

"When the physical body isn't able, the child doesn't have much hope. He gets poor water, poor nutrition, so he can't sleep. He goes to school, but he can't concentrate. He needs glasses or a hearing aid, but he can't get them, so he drops out, marries someone like him, they have kids and it starts over."

One waif-thin woman who had just brought her infant daughter home from the hospital after a bout with pneumonia connected her living conditions with sickness in the family.

"I'm pregnant now and we've got to move," she said. "I've had a miscarriage and a stillbirth and this baby's sick all the time. I'm afraid to stay here."

And a community worker told of an encounter with a family who had brought in a sick child. "The child was carrying a fever. We took them to the clinic and they found that the water was bad."

Of the 82 families with whom we talked, 36 reported some type of major illness in the family. Families reported heart disease, pancreatitis, diabetes and other serious health conditions, as well as childhood asthma, pneumonia and allergies. We talked with families which were coping with potentially terminal ailments such as brain tumors and we witnessed the difficulty that long-term illness places on families living in bad housing with no running water.

"We are high into kidney disease here and we see a lot of worms and parasites as a result of poor housing and large numbers of people living together in unsanitary conditions," a Clay County health official said.

She also described the difficulty of providing home care for seriously ill or injured persons.

"A newborn is released from CAMC on a monitor and they ask if we would check and see how it is doing. We go to the home and there's no electricity, no refrigeration and the baby is not on a monitor.

"At another home, the monitor was hooked up on an extension cord from the neighbor next door. They had no electricity and they'd run that cord just so the monitor could be hooked up.

"People come home and part of the rehabilitation process from cancer or accidents or heart disease is to have a home safe, and their homes are not safe. It's a long road before they even have the basics."

An example is a boy who two years ago was left paralyzed following a car wreck. His parents were on AFDC with five in the family.

"We couldn't get a wheelchair through the door of the house," the official said. "There was no bathroom or running water. Staff from different agencies met with the family to set priorities in obtaining the basics.

"This year we worked on getting a room for him. He didn't have his own bedroom. I went to the school and asked the principal if the kids could raise money for the room -- he would have graduated this year. The kids raised $1,000 and his dad built the room with a sliding door so he can see outdoors. Finally, after two years, we're able to work in the home and feel safe that we're not encouraging infection. It's been a real community effort."

Physical ailments also produce stress for people already living on the edge.

One woman suffering from pancreatitis told us, "I've got a bill for more than $100,000 sitting in there and another for $80,000. I'll never get them paid if I live to be 100. I try not to worry, but you can't help it."

A Clay County health official described a typical procedure. "People come in here for health care and very often they have vague complaints -- headaches, they're nervous. We listen and then we ask, 'Are you under stress?' A flood of tears come and then we begin to heal."

A Lincoln County community worker noticed similar reactions. "A lot of people have emotional problems. They get a helpless, no-way-out feeling, which is understandable. I'm surprised the suicide level isn't higher." (State health figures show that there were only six suicides in Lincoln County in 1986 and none in Clay County.)

The Clay County official agreed with the Lincoln County worker. "Domestic violence and child abuse are problems. For many of them, the husband is out of work and they can't keep up with the bills. They need to relieve the stress.

"From the early 80s a real depression or powerlessness has set in. People realize that jobs are gone forever, the mines are not going to reopen and it has been downhill all the way. You can see that by people being sick."

A Lincoln County woman, stuck in a broiling hot trailer with two active children, with no money, no transportation and no hope, summed up the feeling. "I hate this place. I stay so depressed, it ain't funny."

And a Clay County woman whose children had been taken away from her told us, "It's at a point where I don't want to live. I don't have anything to live for. I just can't take too much more."

TROUBLE IN THE SCHOOLS

The Rural Homelessness Project also found a connection between poverty and success or failure in school.

Of 43 families with school-aged children, 32 reported the children were having difficulty. This number was an astounding 17 of 19 families in Clay County.

Families said their children were failing grade levels, were being placed in special education classes or were dropping out of school. (Those who have already dropped out were not included in our figures.) Other parents complained that their children had been placed in "dumping ground" classes for so-called "gray area" children who have low IQ test scores, but not low enough for them to qualify for special education services. These children are said to be achieving at a level believed to be comparable to their ability and can be moved through the school system without meeting standards set for children with higher IQ scores. Classes described by parents were not taught by teachers trained in special education.

"My boy has a problem, but I think the problem is with the teacher," one parent said. "This guy has bad kids, slow kids, troublemakers and whatever. I complained to the principal and so did other people."

Another said, "My son is six. He didn't learn a thing in kindergarten. They have to hold him back."

A father told us, "My daughter's ten and she'll be in the second grade. She's been three times in the first grade."

Another woman told of her meetings with school officials. "I've been down there six times. They tell me my boy is doing fine and then they laugh at me when I leave. He'll come in and lay on the bed and toss and turn and cry."

These problems were discussed by parents who in many cases had failed in the school system themselves and didn't know how to help their children.

Both Lincoln and Clay counties have high student dropout rates. In Clay, we were told two of five students drop out before completing high school. In Lincoln, approximately one-third of the students drop out. Traditionally these dropouts have come from poor rural families.

As one parent said, "If you're somebody, then they'll figure out how to help your child. But if you're nobody, they won't and there's not a lot you can do about it. Especially if you don't have any transportation and the school is miles away."

EXISTING PROGRAMS

Although the need in Lincoln and Clay counties is much greater than the ability of agencies to take care of families in need, programs do exist to assist the poor.

Both Clay and Lincoln counties have weatherization programs. Under these programs, qualifying families may receive home repairs to keep out the cold -- new doors, windows, underpinning and insulation. Unfortunately, the waiting list in each county will mean a two-year delay before needed repairs can be made. And the amount of money that can be spent per home -- approximately $640 --isn't enough to begin to take care of the problems in most of the homes we visited.

"We have on file 125 approved applications we've never touched," an official said. "We turned down about ten homes that we could not do anything for. They were in such condition they should have been knocked over."

Arguably the most valuable program in the two counties is Head Start, a remnant of the War on Poverty of the 1960s, which is aimed at eliminating some of the problems poor children have to overcome in order to succeed in school. In both Lincoln and Clay counties, the Rural Homelessness Project was impressed with the personnel in Head Start Centers, who are tremendously aware of the problems "their" families face and who were an invaluable source of information and insight for this study. The only criticism we heard of this program was that in Lincoln County, politics sometimes enters into the admission process at the administrative level and the children of professionals are sometimes admitted to the program at the expense of poor children.

The Welfare Department, or Department of Human Services, is met with skepticism. A Lincoln County community worker offered the opinion that many people "would rather do without than meet with welfare workers." Another said

the welfare workers were diverse -- some caring, others not. "It's a roll of the dice as to whether you get a good one or not," she said.

Church and community organizations are dwarfed by the problems. As one worker said, "There's real need here. The problem with FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) money is that we spend so much of it on utilities and people live in homes with these awful holes in the walls. They have a $700 or $800 electric bill in the winter. It breaks us up paying utilities. The Welfare Department can pay for the homeless, but if you're living in a car and they feel like you could be living with someone, they won't pay."

And a community worker in Clay County, who has added bathrooms and replaced gas lines in structures that are barely standing, said, "The home repairs we're putting funds into are bandaids." Clay County does not qualify for FEMA money because the unemployment rate is not high enough, an official told us.

But by far the most controversial program for which poor Appalachian families may qualify is the HUD housing subsidy program. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development inspects available housing stock and approves that which meets federal guidelines. Families that meet income guidelines can be approved for HUD housing and the government subsidizes the rent, which is often $250 to $300. As with the weatherization programs, the waiting list is long for HUD housing. One community worker said she was unable to even get anyone on the list.

"If you have any pull in Washington, ask them to do a Senate investigation of HUD," a Lincoln County official said. "It's a crooked thing influenced on the lower level by politics. They rent trailers for the most astronomical figures I've ever heard -- and apartments and houses owned by a few people. I know of one apartment in a falling-down building that the owner can get $250 a month from HUD for. HUD needs to be re-evaluated."

Another Lincoln County official disagreed. "I'll tell you," she said, "people are living in better homes because of your HUD."

"Some HUD houses are up to standards, others are not," a Clay County official maintained, adding that she was personally aware of housing not approved that was better quality than some which had been approved.

Another Lincoln County official said that when HUD began paying $250 to $300 for housing, rents increased all over the county -- even for those whose rent was not being subsidized. "They (the landlords) figure if HUD can pay that, anybody can, so they raised up rent way beyond what it should be."

A Lincoln County contractor explained, "Before HUD started subsidizing, you could rent a house for $50. The same house now rents for $250. A man working for $3.35 an hour has to have a home and HUD won't pay his payment -- he's just got to put up with it.

"One home I built, HUD was paying $400 and some a month for the apartment they were in. I built the home and the payment to FHA was cheaper than the family's part of the rent. The government is funneling money out and getting nothing. If they were building houses, they'd have something."

The Rural Homelessness Project visited a family of seven living in a five-room house. A shack that had been standing in front of the house was being demolished and the materials used to add two rooms to the rear of the drafty, uninsulated house. Incredibly, it would then by approved by HUD and the rent will double, we were told.

A Clay County official described HUD's operation in his county. "Landlords get over $300 a month for some houses not properly insulated or maintained. Except for 39 units, they're all controlled by one person. Some of the trailers subsidized by HUD should be destroyed. They're filthy traps. The Department of Human Services asked for an investigation and HUD came down and investigated, but they're still substandard.

"What happens here is a family buys a trailer and then loses it. Somebody buys it, socks it in a cesspool somewhere, doesn't underpin it and charges you $275 a month. It's all electric, but you can't pay the bills, so you all sleep on the floor in one room. The water pipes burst and they make you pay. I don't know how HUD can approve it."

(It should be noted that trailers depreciate with time. National housing groups have estimated the average life of a mobile home at 15 years. Most that we visited were more than 20 years old.)

Whether the conversation is with a family, a community worker or even public officials in some cases, eventually the subject of politics comes up. Political control, whether real or perceived, is viewed as a roadblock to reform in Lincoln and Clay counties.

"I had a banker tell me a road couldn't be fixed because they wanted to keep control over people," an official said. "I said that's Clay County. Clay County has so much potential, but some people have a finger on it and I don't care what you do, you can't get that finger lifted."

A Lincoln County community worker said she felt it was a "personal perception that this politician or the other can get you on welfare or keep you off. But if someone goes to Human Services, and if they know that person or like them, it will help. They can bend rules to get someone on if they want them on. They help the people they like."

But a Lincoln County official sees more malice in the system. "This little county is so politically controlled, it is frightening what can happen to people. The powers that be really don't want to change it -- they want it to stay the same."

And some who try to do good inadvertantly feed the political machines in an attempt to help people. "People would come in and say John Doe (a political boss) said to come down and ask if you could help," an official said. "I would call Mr. Doe and ask him to come up with the $50 or $60 needed. He would. Mr. Doe's a fine man."

Meanwhile, those who refuse to play the game, who refuse to seek help from politicians, pay the price -- like the mother of two who lives in a dilapidated trailer surrounded by a sea of horse manure.

"I was told if I voted for certain ones, I would get HUD help," she said. "But I didn't, so I'm on a waiting list and here I sit."

RAYS OF HOPE

In the midst of despair, the Rural Homelessness Project found rays of hope, both among families struggling for survival and among community workers and public officials charged with helping these families.

Time and time again, the people we talked with spoke of the need for housing and jobs programs -- and many feel it is not beyond the realm of possibility.

"There's plenty of lumber and coal in this community," a Clay County official said. "If someone would put up the money, I could build -- paying for the crews -- three bedroom houses for $15,000. You could take a welfare person with a $400 a month check and borrow $17,000 -- $2,000 for the property -- and the family could pay $100 a month on the loan.

"If you had an income source to build a series of homes, if you had $100,000, you could get money back through rental to own. You could put all kinds of people to work for $5 an hour."

"We could apply for a job training grant," another Clay County official said. "Now it's used to put people in public agencies that we know can't provide real jobs for them. We could use skilled and non-skilled people and retrain people. I'd like to see the county buy up acreage so people could own their own homes."

A man living with his family of seven in a two-bedroom trailer agreed with the need for jobs. "Our biggest need in Clay County is work," he said. "We need programs for people who can't read and write. I can't. I've asked for work everywhere. I'd rather work if I could."

And in Lincoln County we met a man who has been building houses for the poor on a limited basis for a number of years.

"A whole lot of people in this country needs homes and I build a few myself," he said. "They cost $26,000 to $30,000. They pay me down on it and they move in and they pay me until it's paid off. I could build houses every day and keep a ten-man crew busy if finances were available.

"I build houses for people on welfare. I can build a good home -- two bedrooms, a sewer, water and heating for $26,000 and it'll last. They pay me $100 a month, no interest. I've been the bank. I've always tried to help people."

One thing the Rural Homelessness Project had impressed upon it time and time again was that rural people do not want to move to cities or even small towns, and they do not want to live in apartment complexes.

"I'd love to own my own home," said one woman with young children. "I wouldn't want an apartment, I'd rather live in the country, but we don't own any land."

"An elderly couple living on a dirt floor are perhaps in no better position than people on the streets. But they would absolutely rather live in the country in bad housing," a Clay County community worker said. "People love living close to the land."

"I like this better out here than where I'm going to move, but at least I can keep my kids warm," said a woman whose family was moving from an extremely dilapidated house with no running water into HUD subsidized housing. "A hillbilly girl like me shouldn't be in town. If I had my way, I'd live back in a holler and I'd have a regular wood house, not real fancy, with one part for the kids to play in."

But those who are able to dream about a better life are in the minority. Again and again, we were made aware of how difficult it is to plan for the future when a family has no job, no income beyond welfare, no property and nothing to fall back on.

More often than not, our questions were answered matter-of-factly, like the Lincoln County woman who told us, "I would like to own a house, but I've got no job and no money," and then smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

CLAY COUNTY

Clay County is a small sparsely-populated county in south-central West Virginia chosen for this study because of the rural nature of its population and the traditional inadequacy of its housing.

Clay's population has been described as "100 percent rural" by county officials. It has had no significant industry since most of its mines closed down, leaving the school system as the leading employer.

The latest available census information stated that Clay had the highest percentage of substandard housing in the state. Almost 50 percent of the county's occupied housing units were deemed inadequate.

It is almost mind-numbing to visit with the families who are struggling to survive in these decaying dwellings where the rain pours through leaking roofs and the harsh winds of winter whip through cracks in walls and around ill-fitting windows and doors; where wiring is suspect and heating is often dangerous; where floors sag and plumbing is a luxury; where hopeless over-crowding exacerbates a multitude of social problems.

The Rural Homelessness Project conducted in-depth interviews with 45 families in Clay County. Additional interviews were conducted with officials, social workers and community workers.

Among the Project's findings:

* The head of the household is unemployed in 37 of 45 families. An additional six heads of household are retired. Only one head of household is documented to have full employment.

* The majority of the families (31) live in houses. Ten live in trailers (only one of which is less than 20 years old). Two live in campers, one in a shed and one in a camper top.
* Twenty-two of the 45 families rent their homes; 12 own or are buying. Eleven families live rent-free in heirship homes, homes owned by other family members or with permission of the landlord.
* Less than half (22 of 45) have hot and cold running water. Fifteen have no running water.
* Seventeen of 19 families with school-aged children stated that their children were having trouble in school. The children have either been retained, labeled slow learners or discipline problems, or are considering dropping out of school.
* Sixteen families reported major illnesses involving at least one family member.
* More than half of the families (26) heat with coal or wood. The remainder use gas or electric. One family had no heat source.

Although the Project did interview a number of county officials and community workers, the majority of our time was spent with families to whom we were referred by those who work with the needy.

The problems poor families face -- major illness, loss of home, bad water, no jobs and general substandard conditions -- are described in the sometimes inarticulate, often terribly moving, accounts which follow.

A STEP AT A TIME

Buddy and Annie C.

Buddy C. is 42 years old, the father of a 15-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son. His wife Annie works evening shift at a hubcap factory 40 miles from their home. Buddy hasn't worked since November 1985, when he learned that he has an inoperable brain tumor.

The family lives in an unfinished four-room house they built themselves and had planned to use as a garage. It is a cold, raw, damp day in early March and a roaring fire from a wood and coal stove warms the house. The motion of a washing machine in the kitchen, however, is enough to make the entire structure shake as Buddy and Annie recount their story.

"I worked as a contract pumper for an oil company," said Buddy, who acknowledged that with his salary and Annie's, they were doing well enough to put a down-payment on a new mobile home.

"He got sick on Monday and Tuesday the trailer came," Annie picked up the story. "We never even moved in. Two weeks later we gave it up."

Buddy talks lovingly of the trailer. "It had two bathrooms and three bedrooms. I couldn't wait to get into it. I was going to talk to the doctor to release me enough to see my new home. I came home, but I had to go back the next day. I got to walk through it. We sold it to a man whose house burned down."

Buddy, Annie and the children were forced to remain in the makeshift house they had called home for five years.

"When we moved in here, we just had a ceiling and a floor," said Annie. "We lived for two years like that. It still needs finish work. We don't have a hot water heater. We have cold running water."

"He needs a bathroom because he can't get to the outhouse," she said. "A community organization said it would help with the labor and they built the room. We couldn't afford to put anything in it. Several people said they'd help us out, but when it came right down to it, no one showed up. They built the room and we closed it off."

The couple also had to face the problem of skyrocketing hospital bills. "I had no compensation, no nothing," Buddy said. "When I got sick, they (the company with whom he contracted) said, 'That's your problem.'

"I was going to the hospital every two or three weeks. One time it was a $189 ambulance ride to Charleston. I don't like to go, but I take seizures and I have to do."

Annie's health insurance covered part of the cost, but it didn't cover emergency room treatment, which Buddy required every time he had a seizure.

"You don't realize how much medical bills are until you get sick," Annie said. "We had humongous bills, but I've about got them clipped off. He's in therapy in Sutton two days a week, and I think it's helping him, but the doctor wants him to stay down in Charleston four months.

"He doesn't want to be away from home four months, and I don't want him to be away that long. I don't know how we'd do it with the kids," she said, explaining that Buddy and the children look after each other while she is at work.

Buddy now has qualified for a medical card and Supplementary Security Income, which is providing some relief for the family.

"The medical card is a blessing," Annie said. "When he first got sick, we had to hock everything we owned for prescriptions. I'd buy five pills at a time.

"I make $200 a week take-home pay. I have a $200 truck payment, a $75 loan payment and $65 for the washer and dryer. My union dues are $15 a month and our electric bill's $40 or $50 a month. We don't get food stamps and they've (her company) taken away our health insurance."

But the grimness of the situation has not destroyed Annie's optimism, which has been the family's strength and inspiration. "I've got another year's payments on loans and then maybe I'll be able to work on the house," she said. "I plan to drill a new well with income tax money. Maybe next year I can do something else with the income tax money.

"We're just taking it a step at a time."

(Through the cooperation of local churches and social groups, the bathroom has since been completed.)

IF I HAD MY WAY, I'D GO BACK TO THAT HOUSE

Mary S.

"We've moved five different times in a year," said Mary S., a heavy-set, dark-haired young woman, who holds her baby in her arms as she tells her story.

She and her husband and four children -- aged 14, 3, 2 and six months -- are trying to get settled in a trailer by a main road after their most recent move.

The year of constant upheaval has been painful for Mary, who thought she had a place where her family could put down roots when they bought a house in a nearby coal town.

"We were buying a house, but FHA (Farmers Home Administration) kept raising the payments," Mary said. "I was taking care of the boys (her younger brothers). My payments had been $112, and then they jumped $60 when I had the boys. But then my mother took the boys. When they left, I wasn't getting as much money, but FHA wouldn't reduce the payments."

Mary said she was encouraged by FHA officials to give up the house. "They told me it would be better if I gave it up because they said when my oldest daughters (now only 14) turned 18, they would stop her social security and I wouldn't be able to pay. I didn't know what to do. My husband was so confused, so we gave it up. The land was up for the collateral, so we lost the land."

It was a bitter blow for a woman whose life has been so filled with misfortune, it is difficult to understand how she has maintained her essential sweetness.

Deserted in childhood by her mother, Mary left home at the age of 14 after her father tried to rape her. Not long after, she gave birth to her first child. When her father died a few years later, she took in her two younger brothers and cared for them until her mother reappeared. The boys have stayed with her from time to time since then.

After enduring this chaotic childhood, Mary wanted to provide a more stable environment for her own children. In her mind, the house represented that stability, making it even more difficult for her to leave it.

Before the family got settled after their initial move from the house, they moved again, to a house owned by the brother of Mary's husband, Don. "Don was doing farm work in exchange, but it got so he was working all the time. They wouldn't let him have 30 minutes with the kids."

So the family moved again, this time to a house where they paid $150 a month rent. "We packed our own water, and it was full of roaches and rats," Mary said. "I was afraid for the kids."

They moved once more, this time paying $25 more a month in rent for a trailer that was not in very good condition.

"Then we moved to this trailer," Mary said. "It's better, warmer, it has carpet and the yard is fenced in. I'm happy here, but it's $200 a month."

One drawback is that the trailer has only two bedrooms. "I have two small beds in the girls' room. Half of the time I sleep in a chair," Mary said. "Don sleeps on the floor for his back. The little girls either sleep on the floor or in my oldest daughter's room."

Although she says she's content with the trailer, Mary expressed interest when her brother showed her an advertisement for a family to move in and take care of a farm.

"It's no rent and they'd pay Don $200 a month to milk and do other work. It would be nice and I could get caught up on bills," she said. "But I said, 'Let me get used to being moved her.' It's hard on the kids to keep moving around."

As it is, her husband is working part-time as a repairman for a local landlord, and Mary's current landlord has been willing to make necessary repairs to the trailer, so she's almost afraid to give up what she has for what she doesn't know about.

"We haven't had any real problems here," Mary said. "We have electric furnace heat, but I want to get a wood stove by next winter."

And although Mary says she's contented, a part of her longs for the house she was forced to abandon. "People in that community are trying to get us to move back," she said. "And if I had my way, I'd gather up my young'uns and go back to that house. . . if they'd only let me."

I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HOLDING THIS UP

Henry and Callie May J.

Henry and Callie May live rent-free with their three teen-aged daughters in a dark, dilapidated house over a hillside just outside the town of Clay.

The house is in such bad condition, it almost defies description. The ceilings sag so badly they appear ready to collapse at any moment. The floors have holes a foot wide. Any semblance of paint or wallpaper is long gone from the cardboard walls.

Dirt is inches thick where flooring actually exists, cigarette butts overflow ash trays, dirty dishes stand in the kitchen, trash has been pushed under beds. The stench of garbage, dampness from the leaking ceilings, excrement and body odor is overpowering.

The house is an heirship home. "My dad used to live here and my grandfather used to live here," said Callie May. "It's older than 100 years old probably."

The family was given permission to stay in the house by Callie May's aunt, who recently died. Other members of the family who live nearby apparently are less enthusiastic about having the family remain in the dwelling.

"We've lived here ten years," said Henry. "I wanted to fix it up, but (the new owner) won't let me. I wanted to tear it down and move a trailer in here, but he won't let me. We can't even get a commode in here and I'm sick and got to get one. The sink is tore up, and I ain't got the money to do anything about it. The roof leaks in the bathroom and one bedroom."

Callie May said she fell through the roof while she was trying to put tarpaper on it.

"We had a hole so big in the floor we had a 'coon come in her last summer, and we have big old wood rats," she said.

Her husband nodded. "We'd be sitting right here in the front room and they'd stagger in and die right in front of you."

As the snow flies outside on a cold March day, two wood and coal stoves do little to warm the house.

"They put red tags on the heating stove," Henry said of the gas company. "They were supposed to change the meter, but they said we had a leak in the line. We got new lines all through the house. But you can't stay warm. There's two heating stoves out here, and you freeze to death."

The three daughters are attractive, personable girls, who make an extraordinary effort to keep themselves and their clothes clean. In the filth of the house, it would seem to be an impossible task, but somehow they manage.

The two older girls have had a great deal of difficulty in school. Seventeen and 18 years old, both are in tenth grade. "They want to quit, but they're going because of me," Callie May said.

The girls conduct a tour of the dark house, where bare lightbulbs provide the only light and where blankets have been hung up to walls to try to keep in heat. They point out the stuffed teddy bears and other keepsakes in their bedroom -- the only personal touches in the house.

Henry said he remains hopeful that the family can find better housing. "I

hope we can find a place across the creek," he said. "We've got to find a house -- we can't sit here. I don't know what's holding this up."

But a community worker is skeptical. "I don't know who would rent to them. They need more than a house. They need to learn living skills and housekeeping skills, too."

A FELLER NEEDS A PORCH

John M.

He's somewhere near a hundred, John said, but he can't remember just how old he is.

Those who could help him remember -- family and friends -- are long since gone. He is the sole survivor of his family and he lives alone in a tiny, dilapidated house in rural Clay County.

He is tall and thin, neatly dressed, with close-cropped white hair and leathery skin, the evidence of years of outdoor work.

The house is a tiny box divided into two small rooms. The ceilings are so low, John's head touches when he stands. Wires come out of the fuse-box and criss-cross around the room.

"I've got a leak, but I can't find where it leaks," he said. "I've been here six or seven years. I've torn this house down and rebuilt it five times."

John's main concern is not the tiny house or his cramped living conditions. Nor is it the leaking roof and the fact that the building does not provide adequate shelter from the colds of winter. He doesn't complain about the lack of running water, the outdoor toilet or the dangerous wiring.

What John is concerned about is the fact that he doesn't have a front porch.

"It fell off that last big snow," he explained. "Just fell right off."

As he sits on a neighbor's porch on an early spring morning and talks about his loss, it is apparent that a front porch is necessary for his well-being.

"A feller needs a porch in the summer," he said, admitting that he can't afford to pay for the materials needed to construct one and is no longer able to do the work himself.

"It's just too hot here in the summer," he said. "I just get $200 a month. By the time I pay the electric bill and get something to eat, it about cleans it up."

The only home repair program available to residents of Clay County is a weatherization program operated by the county's Development Corporation. Funds from this program can only be used for repairs that involve energy savings -- sealing or replacing doors and/or windows, repairing roofs, providing underpinning and insulation.

John is not even aware of this program.

"I can't read or write so I don't know much about anything," he says matter-of-factly.

Nowhere in the county are funds available to restore a porch to the home of a 100-year-old man.

"It's just not right not to have a porch," John insisted. "At least not in the summer."

(After John's story was published in the Covenant House newsletter, anonymous donations from readers provided enough funds to buy materials needed to construct a porch on John's house. The porch was built by John's neighbor, who did not charge for his labor. As one who saw it noted, "His porch is better than his house. Maybe he should enclose the porch and tear down the house.")

I'VE NEVER HAD RUNNING WATER

Doris and Clifton T.

On a miserably humid day in late spring, Doris T. has scrubbed her house and has hung a large wash to dry on lines on her front porch. She and her husband Clifton sit in the living room talking with two of their grown sons.

Every breath is an effort for Clifton, who is suffering from advanced emphysema, and he makes an audible sucking noise as he lights another unfiltered Camel cigarette.

The conversation is about gardening. Both parents and sons are rightfully proud of their gardens, which are a vital part of their existence. "If it weren't for the garden, I don't know what I'd do," said Doris.

The dilapidated house, with its rotting floors, leaking roof and five tiny rooms is hardly adequate shelter for the family of seven, but Doris says the house was all the family could find after they were burned out of their last home.

"We lived with my daughter -- ten of us in a three-bedroom trailer -- for a month and a half," she said. "We had to go somewhere. It's hard to find a place, period.

"We pay $60 here. The electricity is bad and on the back side, the foundation has rotted out. We've got leaks in the roof and windows out. We put plastic on the windows, but we can't afford to do any repairs. It needs a lot of work done on it. The landlords said they wouldn't do any."

As if to offer proof, Doris produced a letter from her landlady which read: "We have decided not to have it rewired at this time. (The house) needs to be completely remodeled and repaired, but it is impossible for us to do that now."

In Doris's kitchen, the painted cardboard ceiling hangs down over her stove and the darkened paper is evidence of the leaking roof above it. In her sons' room, the roof leaked so badly the boys had to move their beds to avoid getting rain in their faces while they slept.

Although Doris and Clifton have had fifteen children, only one has completed high school, and all but one of the girls had a teenage pregnancy.

They lost one child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, a loss Doris still agonizes over. "A crib death, they said," she recounted. "We brought her home from the hospital and she died that night. Some said it was our fault, but the hospital said to bring her home."

The family does not have running water. "We carry it from a spring up there," Doris said. "We walk up and get it. They must have had pipes in here before because there's a bathroom, but it's not hooked up now.

"I've never had running water. I'm not able to haul it and neither is my husband. The kids get it for us."

But what worries Doris the most is the wiring in the house. "The electric scares me," she said. "Some of the lights don't work. We were in a house that burned down from February to November, and it was probably in better shape than this one. Before that we lived in a house from August to January. We were burned out of that one, too. Both of them were electrical fires.

"It's four times altogether we've been burned out," she said. "We lived in one house a good while -- four or five years -- but lately we've been moving.

"These things happen, I guess, but I don't know why it always happens to us."

THE SUN DON'T SHINE IN HERE

Teresa B.

"This August I will have lived here a year, and I hate it here. My kids are sick constantly," said Teresa B., a thin woman with long dark hair that is turning gray.

Teresa lives with her husband and four children (aged 8, 7, 4 and 3) in a two-bedroom HUD-approved trailer in a hollow that has been carved out of a hillside. Trailers have been packed in, less than four feet between some, one against another, so close that families are privy to intimate parts of each others' lives.

"We're all family," said one resident of the trailer park when asked about the lack of privacy. "The trailers are so close, I'd hate to have strangers move in."

The entire trailer park is damp and gray. Teresa lives at the end of this hollow in a trailer that has been pushed up against a rock cliff. Her children's playground is the mud between the trailers.

"The doctors have told me the kids are sick because of this holler," she said. "I've got a boy out of school now. It's so damp."

The trailer is more than 20 years old and years of leaks have taken their toll. A tree fell on it last winter, causing structural problems.

But Teresa says she's lucky the tree didn't fall on the kitchen. "The kitchen ceiling is about ready to collapse. If the tree had hit the kitchen, it would have caved in," she said.

" My old man thought I'd be happy here," she said. "But it's not big enough for six people. The kitchen and living room are together and you know I can't stand that. I don't know how old it is, but it's old. The air don't circulate in there. I keep windows open for my four-year-old to breathe. She has asthma."

Teresa used to live in a large house in a more rural area. "The house was huge and the air could circulate," she said. "We burnt coal and wood there. This has got gas and electric heat. But my little girl wasn't sick there."

She said the landlord has patched the leaks in the ceiling. "It used to leak bad, and the rats have eat it to pieces under the kitchen sink, but I got me two cats so I haven't been bothered so much by rats," she said.

The landlord told Teresa he's trying to get her approved for a four-bedroom apartment in a HUD-approved apartment complex.

"If I can't get it, I told him I'd stay here on one condition," she said. "If he'll fix that leak. The water is pouring around the sink right now.

"But he's so slow you can't put any dependency on him. Unless you call him twice a day, he won't do much. I pay him $200 straight cash and then you have utilities and everything else. One of my sons draws SSI (Supplementary Security Income) and the other kids draw welfare."

A woman offered to sell her a house for $12,000, but she couldn't afford it, Teresa said.

"But I need more space," she said. "That apartment he's talking about is not that big and it's close to the road. I'd rather live out some place where the sun shines. The sun just don't shine in here."

LINCOLN COUNTY

Lincoln County has long been considered one of West Virginia's traditional poverty pockets, sandwiched between the industrialized Kanawha Valley to the north and the ruggedly rich coal lands of Logan and Boone counties to the south.

Tobacco is the main cash crop of Lincoln County, but politics is the life blood. The leading employer is the County Board of Education.

Lincoln County has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the state (replacing Clay County in 1987) and the highest percentage of people receiving food stamps for the unemployment rate. Large corporations own 78 percent of the minerals and 50 percent of the surface land of the county.

The Rural Homelessness Project found in Lincoln County a more profound sense of hopelessness and powerlessness than even in Clay County. Families seemed to be more isolated, less able to travel and less exposed to life outside their very small communities.

Lincoln County was chosen as one of the counties to be targeted by this investigation because of its traditional poverty, its well-publicized political mischief and the poor quality of its available housing stock.

In 38 interviews with families in Lincoln County, the Rural Homelessness Project found:

* Twenty-five of 38 heads of household were unemployed. An additional ten heads of household were retired. Only three people were documented to be employed, one of them part-time.

* A majority of the families (29) live in houses. Seven live in trailers and two in public housing apartments.
* Seventeen families rent their homes; 12 own or are buying homes or trailers; and nine live rent-free in heirship homes or with the permission of family members.
* Eleven families had no running water. Two had cold water only. Twenty-four had hot and cold running water, but a majority complained about the quality of the water.
* Fifteen of 25 families with school-aged children complained that their children are having difficulty achieving in school.
* Exactly half of the families (19 of 38) reported that at least one family member was suffering from a major illness.
* Nearly half of the families (18) heat their homes with wood and coal. Thirteen use gas, six electric. One family had no heat source.

The Rural Homelessness Project concentrated its efforts in Lincoln County on locating and interviewing families living on the edge of survival. Interviews also were conducted with local public officials, church and community workers and others who helped us gain insight into the interrelatedness of the different aspects of poverty.

We were moved by the willingness of people to welcome us into homes miles off the beaten path. Again and again, they shared their stores of struggle, pain and survival. Some of those stories follow.

I HATE IT WHEN IT GETS DARK

Brenda V.

"Living this close puts a strain on. Everybody gets on everybody's nerves," said Brenda V., a cheerful capable woman who lives with four school-aged children and a disabled husband in a tiny four-room house which, despite her valiant efforts, is still too cold, too leaky and too small to qualify as a home.

"I hate it when it gets dark," she said. "My kids love each other to death, but they're always at each other. They lay in bed at night -- 'He's got his leg on me,''He won't shut up.' I'm in there beating on the wall telling them to shut up. Sometimes it takes forever for them to get quite."

Brenda and her husband Billy sleep in one room, their sixteen-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son share another room, and the other children sleep on couches and on the floor.

"Usually the kids are not all at home. When they are, they just sleep where they can. Nobody has their own space, nobody has their own drawer. It's not a good environment for kids, being crowded. They need room to grow," Brenda said.

The house is owned by Brenda's aunt who lets them stay in it rent-free. But it should have been torn down years ago, in Brenda's opinion.

"If you took the paneling down, you could walk through the walls," she said. "When we moved in, the only thing that separated us from the outside was the wallpaper.

"We have an outside toilet and we built it. We put the windows in and flooring in the kitchen. I papered every one of these rooms, but we paneled the living room because the holes were so big paper wouldn't hide them.

"And it's so hard to bathe in here. That boy (motioning to the 10-year-old) cannot get clean from a pan. My daughter's 16. I guess the reason she won't have a boyfriend is because she's ashamed of this house. It's hard for her with four rooms and three brothers.

"I want better for the kids," Brenda said. "I grew up in a place worse than this, and I appreciate what I've got. I was 16 and Billy was 19 when we got married.

"Our first house was a log barn my grandpa built for his mule. We put a floor in it and nailed cardboard papers up and put paper over it. It was two rooms.

"We had a coal cooking stove, a table, a couch that made into a bed and a rocking chair. We fished all day and played dominoes all night. There was no way to get back and forth across the river except by the boat, and then somebody stole the boat. I was pregnant with Lisa and I had to wade the river, up above my waist, to get to the doctor.

"There were times I'd bust ice in the creek and pack it home and put it on the stove and melt it to wash clothes. There were times when we had nothing at all to eat. And I had three kids by the time I was 20."

But then, almost miraculously, things began to look up. Billy got a good job with the railroad, and the family was able to build a modest home.

Then, just as suddenly, disaster struck again. The house was destroyed by fire and Billy was injured on the job. Because he failed to file an accident report, he was unable to draw any benefits. Shortly thereafter, he learned he has pancreatitis, a frighteningly serious disorder, which means he probably will not be able to work again.

"You wouldn't believe the people right around here who have died of pancreatitis," Brenda said. "The doctor says alcohol is the main cause, but Billy doesn't drink and neither did our neighbor. But the doctor said it could be a chemical used in creosote and weed killers. Both of them sprayed the railroad lines."

To compensate for Billy's loss of income, Brenda took a part-time job and is starting to take college courses with the hope of becoming a teacher. But Billy's illness and the illness of their son, Jamie, have made it difficult for her to keep up with school work.

Jamie suffers from an as-yet undiagnosed neuorological disorder which results in paralysis of parts of his body. He has required out-of-state medical treatment, which has placed an additional burden on the family.

Brenda worries about the effect of their poor housing on the health of both Billy and Jamie. "This is out in the woods in a tent, just about," she said.

"I'd like to buy a place or build one. I could make house payments. Three bedrooms would do me plenty and a place to put in a little garden. It doesn't have to be no fancy place.

THERE'S NO OTHER PLACE WE CAN GO

Karen B.

The walls in Karen B.'s house are so thin an adult could push them in by leaning a little too heavily; the floors so weak a high-spirited child could fall through if he jumped in the wrong place; and an ancient, constantly-operating hot water heater poses an ever-present danger in the red-hot bathroom.

Karen and her husband pay $150 a month to live in this uninsulated structure that barely provides shelter for them and their two young children.

"Before we moved in, we had to fix the floors," Karen said. "Some of the floors in the bedroom are still bad. If you'd bounce on it, you'd fall right through. We roofed the house in exchange for six months' free rent, but there weren't any floors, so we had to replace them.

"What's been done here, we've done it. We've covered bare boards with paneling on the ceiling. I've got a pair of pants across the bottom of the door to keep out the cold.

"The wiring is shot and some of these windows won't even close. It stays chilly all the time. Before we put carpet down -- somebody gave it to us -- we like to froze to death.

"We had gas heat then. It was costing us $200 a month to just be cold. Me and my husband have talked about getting insulation, but we're still back-paying electric and gas bills from last winter. I hope we can get them paid up by this winter."

Of greater immediate concern to Karen is the hot water heater, which she is afraid may explode.

"You can smell the gas from it," she said. "At the kitchen sink, the hot water won't turn off. I've told the landlord about it and he won't do anything. It's running my gas bill up and keeps that hot water heater running all the time. There's no shut-off valve (for the faucet) except at the pump and that would cut his water off too. The water runs like that 24 hours a day."

Meanwhile, the landlord has complained that Karen is using too much water and has told her she will have to quit washing clothes. "We're on the same well, but I use a wringer washer and he uses an automatic. I know I don't use as much water as he does."

The family receives a $312 monthly check from the Department of Human Services. After they pay the rent and utilities, they have little left.

In addition to her housing difficulties, Karen has a child who suffers from a serious eye disease. "She has something the doctor said could lead to complete blindness," Karen said.

Both of her children have had repeated bouts with respiratory problems, which Karen connects with the cold house. "My kids keep a lot of colds and my little girl gets pneumonia every year -- in October's when she gets it."

Before moving into this house, Karen lived with her sister-in-law and her family -- fifteen people in a six-room house with no running water.

"We slept on couches and on mattresses on the floor," she said. "We'd stack the mattresses on the beds of a day. We had an outdoor toilet and to take a bath, we used a big tub on the porch."

"I was pregnant and my doctor told me not to go out except to come for appointments. My sister-in-law would go to the store and I'd watch the kids. They'd jump upstairs and the whole house would move."

In her dreams, Karen sees her family living in a decent, warm house with sturdy walls and safe water and electricity. But for now, she has few options.

"We looked at an apartment, but they wanted to put us on the top floor," she said. "With my daughter's eyesight as bad as it is, I don't want her on the top floor. She has to feel her way to the house here and we've just got three or four steps."

Karen paused and with a sigh said, "There's just no other place we can go right now."

I HATE THIS PLACE

Patty W.

"I was told if I voted for certain ones, I would get HUD (U.S. Housing and Urban Development) help, but I didn't, so I'm on a waiting list," said Patty W., a large, obviously unhappy woman who lives with her husband and two children in a run-down trailer on a dirt road near the Logan County line.

"There's holes in the floor here, a big one in the bathroom," she said. "I know snakes could get in it. The flooring's out behind the door and the carpet dry-rotted so I took it up.

"The roof leaks and the welfare just covered a sewer ditch. You can knock this door in. There's horses in the field so we've got these flies all the time."

The flies are everywhere, swarms of them filling the trailer, settling on everything on it. Patty swatted unsuccessfully at them as she told her story.

"The door on the back won't shut and the window's won't shut," she said. "I don't want to be here this winter. It's cold and damp. I was told by the electric company when I lived here before the wiring wasn't safe. I can't turn that stove off. I have to pull the fuse to shut it off."

The family pays $140 a month for this totally inadequate housing. They have running water, but a bad odor and taste make it virtually undrinkable.

The trailer is heated electrically, but Patty said the cost of heat is extremely high, and she still is unable to keep it warm.

Because the family has not been able to find safe, suitable housing, they have moved time and time again, from one substandard house to another.

"I lived here once before. It was in better shape then," Patty said. "She kicked us out because the electric got cut off. We had the rent paid up."

From the trailer, the family went to live with Patty's father in a house that, in her words, was "worse than anything."

"After that we lived in a house that a bedroom floor and ceiling had fell in. The kids' bedroom floor fell in. Plus it had 1,500 cockroaches. You couldn't drink the water. We paid $175 rent because we didn't have no place to go."

In perhaps the saddest chapter of this nomadic saga, they were offered a house rent-free if they would put in a septic system and clean up around the house.

"We went and got the septic tank and pipe. We dug the hole and buried the pipes and got the stuff for the leach beds," Patty said.

"It cost us over $600 for the materials that we charged at a hardware store. It was like we were paying more than $100 a month. And the bathroom wasn't hooked up. It was unfinished and absolutely terrible. He promised to fix the hot water heater, but he didn't.

"And then as soon as we got everything done and we had paid our bill down to about $100, he evicted us and his sister tore the house down. They put a trailer in there."

The family had to move quickly, so they ended up in the trailer they had left two years before.

"There was a big storm that day," Patty said. "We had nowhere to go and we ended up here. There's just nothing."

The trailer is miles away from the main highway and even further from a grocery store. "We don't have a car," Patty said. "If I go to the store, I'll have to pay someone $10 to take me. My husband took off today with a friend of his, but he wouldn't let me and the kids go.

"I hate this place," she said, a look of desperation on her face. "I stay so depressed, it ain't funny."

WE NEVER HAD A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Melanie C.

"My idea of a good place to live is a couple of acres so you have a place to garden and a place for the kids to play; a place strong and sturdy on the inside; a place big enough that if I move the furniture and clean, I can switch it around. As it is, I pull it out, clean and put it back."

An attractive, soft-spoken, self-possessed woman, Melanie C. lives with her husband and three daughters in a trailer that is nearly 20 years old. It's not a bad place compared to the homes of some of her neighbors -- and even the house she used to live in. And it's a far cry better than the housing she knew as a child, growing up amidst personal tragedy and severe deprivation. But it's not how she wants to live.

"When I was growing up, we never had a place to call home. Dad would stay in a place ten months or a year and then move on. He'd even own places and he'd turn around and sell them for nothing," she recalled.

"He just did little old odd jobs. We lived up a holler and we had a garden. If it hadn't been for our garden, we would have starved. Dad was drunk most of the time.

"Mom had nine kids and then she died after having the last one. She was only 35 years old. I was 13, second oldest, the oldest girl. It was hard with eight others and Dad an alcoholic.

"I can remember getting up and starting the fire -- we used wood and coal. I'd cook breakfast, get my brothers and sisters up and ready and set the table. By the time I'd get breakfast fixed and get them ready, I'd have to leave for high school. Most of the time I'd have to leave without breakfast. I'd make sure they knew what time to go out on the road and get the bus and then I'd go to school.

"When I'd get home, the dishes would all be there. I can remember the house needed so much. I can remember cleaning windows and thinking it looked so much better. Then I'd stand back and know that it looked a lot better, but nothing was going to help unless you went in and put in sheet rock and really fixed it up."

Except for school, she never left the hollow. Even as an adult, Melanie's travel and experiences away from home have been limited. She had never been to a movie theater until a community worker recently took her and her children to see "Snow White."

To escape her home situation, Melanie was married at the age of 16 to Danny C. Danny repaired cable for a mining company and he made more money than Melanie had ever seen.

"I was so excited because we could put some away each week," she said. "We didn't have a baby for two years so we could be ready when we did."

But still they lived in a small, two-room house that lacked running water. The houses in the community were packed together so tightly that the neighbor's kids seemed to be inside Melanie's house.

"Then my first daughter was born and she was the sickliest child," Melanie said. "The woman next door had eight kids. I'd be up all night with the baby, but you couldn't sleep in the daytime. We still lived there when we had two kids."

The family then moved to "a little old house that needed a lot of work," according to Melanie. "Every year the water pipes froze solid no matter how much you wrapped them." That house is now occupied by Karen B. and her family.

The cost of raising a family and trying to maintain deteriorating houses ate up the families meager savings account. Then Danny fell ill with Addison's Disease, which left him disabled and almost cost him his life. Melanie is still not confident he can survive the ailment.

So until the future is better defined, she probably will stay in the trailer.

"It's hot and it's not big, but it's warm in the winter," she said. "I've had people say you can't keep a trailer warm in the winter, but this is good

and warm. We have a good landlord. If we mention something, he'll get the stuff and fix it."

But while she knows she can't do anything about her current situation just now, Melanie can't help but dream of the home she would like to have for her husband and daughters.

"This is a lot better than where we have lived, but there's nowhere for a garden and it's too little. If I had my way, I'd have me a home."

LIKE LIVING IN A BARN

Ruthie B.

Ruthie B. is one of those people who has fallen through all of the so-called safety nets society offers. Except for food stamps, she has absolutely no income -- no way to pay rent and utilities, or buy clothing and other necessities.

Ruthie lives with two of her five children at the head of a beautiful little hollow in rural Lincoln County. In mid-summer the daisies and black-eyed susans spill over into the roadway to her house, as if to greet the guest who has to walk the last half-mile.

"We rent this," said Ruthie, a soft-spoken shy woman who peers out from behind thick eyeglasses. "The landlord's in Kentucky. He never has done anything to this house. I've lived here eleven years. I haven't asked him to do anything -- I just took for granted he wouldn't.

The house is ancient and rotting. Ruthie has thumbtacked a garbage bag to the living room ceiling to close up a foot-wide hole where the ceiling fell in. Other parts of the water-logged ceiling appear ready to meet a similar fate.

"The floors are fairly sturdy, but the roof isn't," she said. "The windows don't fit and some of them are broke out. That hole in the ceiling is big enough for anything to come in, and I don't want no bats in here. There's holes in the walls, too."

As bad as the house is structurally, Ruthie has struggled to create an attractive home. Throughout the house are touches of her artistry -- a crocheted pillow here, a flower decoration there.

But despite her loving touches and the personal stamp she has put on the house, it is not Ruthie's and her future is extremely precarious.

"I haven't been paying rent because I don't have anything to pay with," she said. "I haven't paid for about a year."

What has been her landlord's response to her predicament, she was asked. "He told us to get out," she replied.

The rent for the five-room house is $25 a month. The dwelling lacks running water and indoor plumbing. Ruthie and her children haul water from a well. They have an outhouse in the back.

"What's been done, we've done, but I really don't have anything to do anything with. We put linoleum down and painted," she said. "We heat with wood and coal, but we don't stay warm. It'll freeze ice in the kitchen in the winter and the fire going. We can't keep warm. This is about like living in a barn."

Ruthie's husband deserted the family several years back. She lost her last means of support -- her welfare check -- when the two children remaining at home quit school.

Forty-six years old, uneducated, unskilled, with failing eyesight and no means of transportation, she has never worked outside of her home. She has no reason to believe she might have a chance for any kind of a job.

"I can't see to read now," she said. "I've got some kind of eye disease. I can't see to sew or crochet any more. It's been five years since I've been to the doctor and it's got worse. But I can't do anything about it."

Despite her grim circumstances, Ruthie longs for a home of her own -- even if it were a most simple dwelling.

"It's really pretty up here," she said. "I'd like to have me a place if it was just one room. I'd have me a garden. We used to have a garden, but they said we couldn't this year because they were going to come in and farm, but they didn't. The owner wouldn't consider selling this place. If he would want to sell it to me, I'd rather have mine as to have it."

But those are dreams. The reality is that she may not even be able to stay in the crude house she has. "I don't know what we'll do if he makes us leave," she said. "I don't have any place to go.

SOMETIMES IT GETS DISCOURAGING

Wanda W.

If you go several miles up a looping hollow, take a sharp left at a cemetery and drive up the side of a mountain for another couple of miles until you come to an unfinished bridge and then walk a half mile or so further, you'll come to Wanda and Wendell W.'s house.

The five-room house, which is home to the family of 11, sits atop a hill, a small dwelling to which a porch has been added and enclosed to create more room.

Inside, photographs of the couple's nine school-aged children cover the walls. Fresh-faced and neatly dressed, the six handsome boys and their three attractive sisters smile out of the frame.

Wanda's oldest son is a junior in high school. Her youngest started kindergarten this year.

"Sometimes it gets real tight in here in the winter," she said. "It aggravates the girls worse. We have three bedrooms -- one for the boys, one for the girls, and one for us. But it's hard for them to get any sleep when it's three in a bed.

"I've got a table, but I don't have eleven chairs. Some of them have to get a lard bucket to sit on."

Wanda and Wendell own the house, but not the land it sits on. "The land belongs to my father-in-law," Wanda said. "We've lived here about ten years. When we came here, this was four rooms. We already had six kids and I was pregnant with the seventh.

"It was February. It was still cold and we hauled water from the creek. We didn't have a well. We really had it rough," she recalled. "We have a bathroom and a drilled well now, but the water's no good. It turns everything brown. When I wash the kids' good clothes, we haul water from the creek.

"We built a porch and boxed that in when we kept having kids. We used to burn wood and it liked to freeze us to death. We put siding on the outside and it's helped, it's given us a little insulation. We bought a coal burner. We'll burn coal this winter and it ought to be warmer."

Wanda and Wendell met in Ohio, when both were employed by a fiberglass factory. They came back to West Virginia, where both were raised, when Wendell got a job with a mine machinery repair company.

With such a large family, it was hard to make ends meet, but things got worse when the mines slowed down, the machinery repair company closed and Wendell lost his job. He has been unemployed for several years while the family has survived on a welfare check. Wendell "works it off" by participating in a workfare program in which he helps the janitor at a local public school.

"He doesn't really know a trade," Wanda said. "He knows a little about machines."

Wanda is a careful manager who stretches the family budget as far as she can. "People give me a lot of things and I go to rummage sales," she said. I encourage my kids to take care of their clothes. I also have three gardens."

When Wanda thinks of the future, she talks about doing more work on the house in which they've already invested so much of their time and limited resources.

"That bedroom doesn't have anything on the walls," she said of a bare board room. "I'd like to fix that. In the kitchen, the ceiling's swayed and it needs braced, but we don't have the time or the money to do that. I'd like to build out from that room and have a narrow room where I could put the sink on one side and the cabinets on another. Then this room could be a dining room."

But all of those dreams cost money -- something Wanda and Wendell never have enough of. "It seems like the kids need everything after school starts," she said. "There's a lot of things they have to do without that other kids have."

"Sometimes it gets discouraging. Sometimes I feel like we no more than get one thing fixed up than I have to do something else. You just have to do a little at a time and hope it lasts."

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Rural Homelessness Project makes the following observations based on the material gathered in this research project:

1. There are large numbers of people in rural areas of West Virginia who live in unsafe, unsanitary and unhealthy structures which do not in reality protect them from the elements. Officially, these families are not considered homeless.

2. Substandard conditions in water supplies in rural West Virginia are so great as to make living conditions unsafe and unhealthy.

3. The rural poor have a difficult time even locating suitable housing, and often are at the mercy of slum landlords or live in hovels they have built or in shacks owned by other family members.

4. Existing housing stock that is decent and suitable is out of the price range of welfare families and other poor families, who, in effect, cannot afford safe and decent housing.

5. The Department of Housing and Urban Development is contributing to the problem by subsidizing substandard and dangerous housing with taxpayer money.

6. Entire families live nomadic existences, moving from one substandard house to another in an effort to survive.

7. The West Virginia Landlord-Tenant Act has no meaning for poor families who live in areas where they must take whatever shelter is available.

8. The West Virginia Department of Human Services does not recognize degrees of substandard housing in making homelessness funds available to families.

9. Families which live in substandard housing with bad water are at risk in other areas of their lives.

10. Families who live in substandard conditions have a high percentage of illness.

11. Families who live in substandard conditions have a high rate of school failure among their children. Many of these children have been labelled "gray area" and are allowed to move through the school system without receiving an education.

12. Existing programs do little except put bandaids on problems that are the equivalent or hemorrhages. Weatherization programs that can install new doors but can't fix a leaking roof aren't really effectively protecting families from the elements. Officials at an agency that can help pay a $200 gas bill, but can't insulate or weatherproof a house, know they will be seeing the same families over and over again.

The Rural Homelessness Project makes the following recommendations:

1. The definition of homeless must be expanded to those families which live in structurally unsound dwellings without safe water and sewage disposal systems.

2. The state must establish and enforce standards for recognizing substandard living conditions below which no family can exist without endangering the health and safety of those living in the house.

3. An integrated support and case-management program must be established that recognizes the special needs of families. (For instance, some families must be educated as to how to maintain a home. Others need help with catastrophic illness or with their children's difficulties in school. Still others need to learn to read and write.)

4. Long-term solutions must come through jobs. As great as the need is for new and improved housing, the logical solution should be the development of work programs, job training programs and home-building programs.

5. The issue of land ownership must be addressed. One of the historical deterrents to home-building in southern West Virginia has been that the land is owned by a few corporations who are unwilling to release it. Land must be provided for community-controlled land trust and housing through the use of eminent domain at the local level.

6. Standards for safe drinking water and water disposal systems must be made a priority and must be enforced through environmental controls.

7. Funding must be increased for AFDC and AFDCU programs and welfare programs must be implemented which support people in their efforts to get off of public assistance.

8. An independent investigation must be conducted into the use of homelessness funds by the state Department of Human Services.

9. An independent investigation must be conducted into the use of HUD monies in rural counties.

10. Urban solutions must not be applied to rural problems. Systems must be established which allow rural people to remain in rural areas in single unit housing and with enough land for gardens and play space for children.

11. Economic planning and decision-making by local governments must involve broad public participation and public hearings on issues. One-third of the membership of local planning boards must be made up of persons affected by the crises.

12. Churches, businesses and philanthropic organizations must involve themselves in this crisis by providing support and resources for economic development and housing initiatives.

13. Every child in this state must get a quality education. The Recht Decision must be enforced and special attention must be paid to so-called "gray area" students so that they are not passed through the school system without an education.

14. We must recognize that the future of our state depends on making sure that citizens are safe and healthy in their home environments and that they have access to pure water, health care and educational services.

15. And finally, it must be recognized that a network of poorly-paid, overworked individuals are extremely knowledgeable about the needs of the rural poor. These groups and the people affected should be involved in developing the systems that address both short-term and long-term need.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study was conducted under the direction of Covenant House, a day shelter for the homeless in Charleston, West Virginia, and funded by the James C. Penney Foundation and the New York Community Trust.

The research was gathered by investigator Beth Spence and members of a steering committee of volunteers. Committee members Kathy Britt, an educator from Clay County, and Regina Brunelle, a church worker from Lincoln County, introduced the investigator to families in their respective counties. The report was written by Beth Spence.

Other members of the steering committee were Barbara Ferraro and Patricia Hussey, co-directors of Covenant House; Linda Martin and Betty Jones, educators from Lincoln County; Nancy Fackner a health official from Clay County; and Susan Weber, a church worker from Logan County.

The investigator and committee members are deeply indebted to those individuals who were willing to talk to us about conditions in Clay and Lincoln Counties. Without their insights and comments, the study would not have been possible.

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